

A Collegial Approach to Developing Leadership

In Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, principals are improving their leadership and their morale by meeting regularly in small groups to share ideas and to learn from each other.

In fall 1984, the Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, School Board launched a Principals' Instructional Leadership Development Project. Now in its fourth year, the project, for which I serve as university consultant,¹ emphasizes improving leadership through a collegial structure.

In developing this project, we agreed that a plan to improve instructional leadership must be a long-term effort and that principals themselves should be key decision makers in the process. Assuming that most principals had heard the message about effective school leadership and that didactic workshops would be unnecessary, we premised our work on the belief that instructional leadership has always been a part of principals' work and thus cannot be developed independently of their day-to-day actions.

Finally, we focused on conceptions of corporate leadership that stress such skills and traits as negotiation, compromise, persuasion, and tolerance for ambiguity. To this end, we developed a "congruent" collegial model in which these characteristics would be fostered and encouraged by the structure of the project itself, a model emphasizing participant involvement in project decision making.

Planning Sessions

To begin the project, we held a series of small-group, open agenda meetings in which we urged principals to voice

their concerns. Discussions flowed freely, and several common themes emerged:

1. frustrating political and administrative issues concerning obtaining resources, assistance, and advice;
2. lack of clear guidelines for actions having litigious consequences such as teacher termination and placing children in special education classes;
3. insufficient time to do anything but respond to short-term situations and emergencies;
4. site evaluations by parish and state educational personnel based on varying criteria, explicit and implicit;
5. proliferation of mandatory standardized testing and resulting administrative problems connected with massive schoolwide testing programs; and
6. problems in generating community/parental involvement and support.

Following this first round of concerns-based meetings, we organized the principals into a series of three two-hour workshops, made up of slightly larger groups. There we blended principals' concerns with findings from school effectiveness studies to provide a framework for continuing the project. These workshop sessions were process oriented, with strong emphasis on small-group activities and discussions. Activities included sharing common knowledge

about effective schools, writing and sharing visions for one's school and matching these visions with reality, and focusing on goals extending beyond the current instructional program, including "people-goals" or goals having to do with the quality of life in schools.

In this early phase, we stressed two norms that would pervade the project: (1) principals' personal concerns would always be legitimate content for meetings, and (2) their perceptions about their work would be utilized in planning subsequent activities.

After the last workshop, about 20 principals out of the initial group of 84 volunteered to develop the Principals' Instructional Leadership Project for the 1985-86 school year. The Planning Committee held a series of meetings in late spring and early summer 1985. During the first planning session, beginning with small brainstorming groups and then meeting as a whole, the committee proposed to create a structure that would bring principals together regularly to share and to learn from one another. This led to the development of the Peer Team Project.

The Peer Team Project

The Principals' Planning Committee placed all principals in Peer Teams of seven members each with the responsibility of visiting each member's school during the year. These open-ended visits were to become the basis

for mutual sharing and learning. There would be no formal evaluation, no reporting up the administrative hierarchy. Each team would assume responsibility for its own schedule. Peer Teams might choose to visit classrooms, to study aspects of the school plant, to discuss specific administrative concerns, or simply to socialize. Each Peer Team was structured to represent geographic areas, grade levels, and members of the Planning Committee. Using shared and implicit criteria based on past experience, the committee identified those principals who, prior experiences indicated, might attempt to obstruct the project in its early stages, and distributed "blockers" among the teams.

In addition to creating Peer Teams, the Planning Committee organized Cluster Groups, composed of three teams each, to meet regularly during the year to debrief team visits. Agendas for Cluster Groups would be open to allow for the introduction of new content in addition to Peer Team activities.

To expedite development of the Peer Teams, in mid-August the Principals' Planning Committee presented its program to the entire group at a Principals' Inservice Day. All principals were assigned to teams, given "get acquainted" time, and put to work developing team schedules. To help provide focus for the Peer Teams, we brought in a consultant to give a school effectiveness presentation and followed this with a wine and cheese reception.

Refining the Project

During the 1985-86 year, most teams completed their school visits. Four Cluster Meetings and four Planning Committee meetings were also held. Rather than formal evaluation, we have relied on "naturalistic" data collection methods—principals' self-reporting combined with observations of teams' on-site visits—in order to encourage principals to participate freely without feeling that they were being evaluated or were part of a university research project.

During this second year approximately 75 percent of Jefferson Parish principals participated in the project,

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especially in the school visits. They gave high ratings to team visits to schools and less satisfactory grades to the Cluster Groups. Many principals said that since there were no pre-announced agendas or specific tasks to perform, they did not feel obligated to attend Cluster meetings. Yet, despite principals' ambivalent feelings about them, Cluster Groups were effective forums for sharing ideas, raising new issues, and informing participants about Peer Team activities; they were also a major source of information for the Planning Committee throughout the year.

The Planning Committee, in response to feedback, decided to emphasize task agendas for Cluster Group meetings for the 1986-87 year. Tasks would center on key features of the Effective Schools agenda. Subsequent Cluster meetings varied in terms of processes and content: principals continued to share, much as they did in the preceding year; but in other instances, they followed specific agendas, focusing on selected aspects of instruction or school management.

Peer Team visits continued to be central to the project during 1986-87, although teams varied their activities according to team interests and did not necessarily adhere to round-robin school visits.

By the end of the 1986-87 year, the Principals' Planning Committee, working with suggestions offered at Peer and Cluster meetings, proposed a Peer Team reorganization based on high school attendance areas. This new arrangement speaks to principals' interests in serving particular communities and students in the parish.

Leadership Indicators

Several noteworthy outcomes of the Principals' Instructional Leadership Development Project have come to light during group discussions and independent interviews with participants.

Feelings of mutual support and interdependency among principals are increasing. Principals also seem to agree more on educational goals across the parish and on how to address them. The project has brought schools closer together in pursuing shared purposes without impinging on the principals' autonomy.

The project has also institutionalized a means for principals' development. Principals can express their interests and develop programs to address specific purposes. Increasingly, principals are exhibiting their leadership by proposing to extend their focus on specific schools to educational outcomes in general.

Finally, many principals feel that their participation has enhanced their morale and stimulated their professional ambitions. In light of the oft-discussed problems of the school as workplace, this result is substantial. As one principal commented:

We are more open with each other; we are more tolerant of our differences ... more aware of our areas of commonality. I feel that we can now work together, help each other, and have some influence in the district. I feel that our efforts are being recognized and that, at least, we are listening to each other ... our credibility has been validated and ... we are more effective school leaders. □

1. Resources and leadership for the project were provided by Anthony Chimento, Superintendent of Schools, and Dee Allen, Director of Personnel for Staff Development and Evaluation.

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